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50CY.01-2 Assassination on Embassy Row
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(originator SOC)

FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Midday STATION WTOP Radio

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SUBJECT Interview with Dinges and Landau

PAT KORTEN: My guests this hour are John Dinges and Saul Landau, who have written a book called "Assassination on Embassy Row." It is about the murder on September 21st, 1976, barely -- well, not quite four years ago -- down near Sheridan Circle, when the car containing Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt and her husband, who survived that incident -- I remember the incident well because I was working here at the radio station at that time, and we heard the initial calls come over the police radio and knew something was amiss. And everyone spent a lot of time covering that story in the days and weeks that followed. But apparently nobody spent quite enough time. There was a lot of information that didn't come out until a year or so later.

Gentlemen, why don't you tell me a little bit about the material you uncovered about the events the preceded the bombing and how you came upon that.

MAN: Well, approximately six weeks before the assassination occurred, the ambassador to the United States -- the ambassador to Paraguay for the United States, in Asuncion, received a request to -- for travel documents, for visas for two men that he knew were Chilean intelligence agents, who wanted to go to Washington. And he was told that this was a CIA-approved operation. And for a variety of reasons, he was suspicious, but he gave the travel documents, and then sent -- but he had pictures taken of the passports. And very quickly, he sent the pictures up to the CIA.

The Chilean agents also got a little bit frightened, because of some delays that had occurred. And they went back to Santiago. Luckily, perhaps. Because if they had gone im-

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mediately to Washington, they probably would have gotten away, at that time, with the assassination.

What happened is that the pictures stayed in U.S. files, State Department files and CIA files. And they were of the actual assassins. And the information was a suspicious intelligence operation under false pretenses.

KORTEN: Now, the word came back to the U.S. ambassador in Paraguay that the CIA didn't know anything about it. That should have raised somebody's suspicions right there, as I understand it.

MAN: Well, the CIA waited a full week before it responded to the U.S. Ambassador in Paraguay. When they did respond, the CIA Deputy Director of Operations, General Vernon Walters, notified the U.S. ambassador to Paraguay that the CIA did not know about this mission and didn't want any part of it.

KORTEN: And so our ambassador to Paraguay said, "Wait a minute. I've approved a couple of passports here, on the theory that the CIA knew something about it." The CIA didn't know anything about it. And he wanted things changed in a hurry.

MAN: He certainly did. And he responded in a way that we refer to as a panic way. He made 10 personal phone calls to the personal representative of the President of Paraguay requesting the physical return of the passports. So the U.S. ambassador literally dialed 10 phone calls himself to the same man, so frightened was he that these passports would have been used.

We think that perhaps in Washington, in Langley, and in other places, there also might have been some intelligence estimates made about what this mission might have been. But as far as we can determine, nothing was done to stop or deter that mission.

KORTEN: Now, at the time, who headed the CIA?

MAN: Mr. George Bush was the Director of the CIA.

KORTEN: Do we have any indication that he took a personal interest in the case, that he knew about all of this? Or did it stay in the hands of his deputy?

MAN: We've based our book on the documents that we received in the case and on interviewing everyone connected with the case. And we've been able to establish that George Bush personally handled the information from Paraguay in this intervening week, and discussed it with Vernon Walters, and together made the decision, first of all, to say, "No, we have nothing to do with this mission," and secondly, apparently, not to do any-

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thing to deter the mission.

KORTEN: Now what happened with regard to relations between the CIA and the Immigration and Naturalization Service? Surely the CIA could have passed along word to the INS that the people who tried to get into the country under these passports shouldn't be allowed in.

MAN: Well, the ambassador himself took care of that. As soon as the CIA told him it didn't want any part of the mission, he revoked the visas and sent notices to all U.S. consulates and to ports of entry saying that if these two people arrive, arrest them. So he took care of that.

KORTEN: Did he have the -- does an ambassador have the authority to do that?

MAN: If he gives...

KORTEN: If he's the one who issues the visas, he does.

MAN: Yeah.

MAN: Now, strangely enough...

KORTEN: So what happened?

MAN: Strangely enough, two agents carrying the same names, only now with Chilean passports, did enter the United States in late August.

KORTEN: But because they weren't Paraguayan passports, they weren't stopped?

MAN: We don't know why they weren't stopped.

KORTEN: But they weren't stopped.

MAN: They weren't stopped. We don't know why they were given visas after the U.S. ambassador revoked visas given to people by that name.

KORTEN: Where were the visas issued, in Chile?

MAN: The second pair of visas were issued in Chile, presumably by the CIA station down there.

KORTEN: We're going to talk some more about "Assassination on Embassy Row" with John Dinges and Saul Landau here on Midday in just a minute.

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KORTEN: We're talking with John Dinges and Saul Landau, who have collaborated in putting out a book called "Assassination on Embassy Row," which is all about the murder here in Washington four years ago of the former Chilean ambassador to the United States, Orlando Letelier.

Gentlemen, we were talking a little bit about the issuance of these visas under Chilean passports to men using the same two names as the ones that had been presented to our ambassador in Paraquay somewhat earlier.

And wouldn't the information that had come from the CIA Director, Mr. Bush, and his assistant have gone to the CIA station in Chile, in Santiago? And if so, why would they have gone ahead and issued the visas for these two guys, anyway?

MAN: We don't have any evidence that the CIA station in Santiago was contacted. But on the other hand, we've been refused all documents from the CIA. We think that that would have been a logical step.

The Chileans, who, of course, have -- will deny that this thing was their doing -- they blame it all on the CIA. We don't believe that. But they say that the CIA was informed, that, in fact, the CIA did tell them to get the visas through Paraguay, first of all, and then gave them the visas in Santiago. Now, we don't know to what extent all of that is true. The fact is that the visas were granted in Santiago, at the official request of the Chilean government.

KORTEN: Now, we know that some years later, a year or two later, Michael Townley was finally -- he was an American who worked for the Chilean DINA, their secret police. He was finally arrested and charged and convicted in connection with this murder. But what we don't really know -- or do we? -- is the -- is how high up in the Chilean government this all went. Do we know for sure that it went all the way up to the top, to General Pinochet? Or did it just originate with DINA?

MAN: Well, the only solid evidence that we have that General Pinochet himself was officially in on this came from the ambassador, U.S. ambassador to Paraguay, who was told that Pinochet personally had requested visas for these two agents. We have other kinds of evidence and backup to suggest that Pinochet himself personally ordered the assassination of Orlando Letelier.

We have interviewed many members of the Chilean armed forces, high-level officers. And all of them, to a man, have agreed that in no circumstance would a subordinate general take on a task like an assassination of a leader abroad without the express authorization of his commander-in-chief.

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So the commander-in-chief of DINA himself, General Contreras, at that time a colonel, would never have taken on such an assignment without the express authorization from the President of Chile, his commander.

KORTEN: And Townley, as I understand it, said in the trial here in Washington, in federal court, that he was acting under orders as an agent of DINA when he carried out the assassination. Am I correct?

MAN: There was no doubt at any time during the trial that Townley was a paid official of DINA.

KORTEN: And he was operating under their orders in carrying out the assassination?

MAN: Absolutely. No question about it. He was following orders.

KORTEN: All right.

We're talking with John Dinges and Saul Landau about "Assassination on Embassy Row." And we will have more to say about that in the next half-hour.

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KORTEN: My guests are John Dinges and Saul Landau, who have written a book called "Assassination on Embassy Row."

I suppose one thing we should have done here in the last half-hour and didn't do is kind of step back a couple of steps and try to explain to the listeners who may not know the entire history of the story how all of this came about.

Orlando Letelier, for those who don't know, was at one time the ambassador from Chile to the United States. He also served in the government of Salvador Allende, back during the early '70s, and was, quite honestly, a man of the left. And when the Allende government was overthrown by the generals in the Chilean Army, who were men of the political right, they decided that Letelier, who was operating at the time here out of the United States, was a threat to them. And that is apparently the rationale for the assassination attempt.

I know that you wanted to talk a little bit not only about the Letelier assassination, but about the policy of assassination in general.

MAN: Well, the Chilean government, as far as I know, is one of the few that uses, or has used, murder as one of the key instruments of its state policy. They haven't -- they did

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not only order the murder of Orlando Letelier; they ordered the successful murder of General Carlos Pratz, who was the former chief of staff, chief of the armed forces of Chile. He was killed, again, by a car bomb in Buenos Aires, Argentina. There was an attempted murder of Bernardo Layton (?), an exiled Christian Democratic politician, in Rome. And the mysterious death of General Oscar Bonilla (?) inside of Chile, again a possible rival.

We know also, from the testimony of the convicted assassination, Michael Townley, that he personally was ordered to murder Carlos Altimirano (?) and Valodia Teitelboin (?), two leftist political leaders in exile.

So that this was a consistent policy on the part of the Chilean government, one that did not begin with Letelier.

KORTEN: Now, we had a call from a listener during the last half-hour who wanted to -- wanted us to bring up a point about some documents which purported to show a connection between Letelier's activities in the United States and the Cuban government. This is suggesting, I suppose, that there was some sort of connection between him and Cuba, that he was a Cuban agent of some sort.

What's the story of that?

MAN: Well, if you make a murder victim a spy, in a sense, that justifies the murder, by implying -- by the implication that among spies this sort of thing is fair game.

The charges that Letelier was somebody's agent has -- based on some documents found in his briefcase, basically a letter from Cuba, from the treasurer of his own Socialist Party, the Chilean Socialist Party, which talked about his stipend that he was receiving from his party for his work in Washington. The FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office have examined those documents very carefully, and they've made -- they've made the statement several times, in court and out of court, that the charges that he was anybody's agent are totally groundless.

It's one of those things that keeps cropping up, because the documents themselves were illegally leaked -- as a reporter, not that I'm against leaks. But these particularly documents were leaked in a very notorious fashion to many, many correspondents around Washington, around the country, even in Europe and in Latin America, to show that, somehow, if he was an agent, then the murder was somehow justified.

KORTEN: This is at a time when there was also some speculation, which was given some currency in the national news magazines, that Letelier had been murdered not by the Chilean

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secret police or by Cuban exiles, but by leftists who wanted a martyr.

MAN: The martyr theory is also one of the things that has been brought up. It was brought up most recently in the murder down in El Salvador recently of Archbishop Romero. The idea that leftists, somehow, are so evil, that they kill their own colleagues in order to create martyrs.

I think there are -- I've never been able to find a historical example where that has been verified. But it continues to brought up. It was -- I am told by the people that I talk to within the U.S. Government it was the common currency within the State Department, and even in the FBI. The tendency to think that perhaps the left should be more of a suspect than the Chilean Government in committing the assassination.

KORTEN: Of course, the Townley trial put all that to rest, really.

MAN: Right. There's never been any evidence that the left was in any way involved or had anything against Letelier.

KORTEN: Now, Saul, you are still at the Institute for Policy Studies, and obviously worked with Letelier when he was working there, prior to his murder. What kind of a relationship did he have with people in Cuba? Is that where the remnants of that faction of Chilean politicians went? Are there representatives of that party in Cuba now, following the ouster of the government of Allende?

SAUL LANDAU: Well, Chileans who belonged to the Popular Unity, which was the Allende coalition, literally fled or sought refuge in many countries throughout the world, Cuba being one of many.

KORTEN: I see.

LANDAU: In fact, Cuba took probably less Chileans than many other countries did.

But the daughter of Salvador Allende, Beatrice Allende, who was the treasurer of the Chilean Socialist Party, did go to Cuba. She had a good reason to do so. She had married a Cuban and had two children by him. This was long before the coup of 1973. And she, as the treasurer, authorized for Letelier $5000, to be paid in $1000 sums each month. She did not say she was sending him the money from Cuba. But rather, as treasurer, authorizing it.

In fact, the Chilean Socialist Party got much of its money from European trade unions and church groups in the U.S.

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and Europe.

KORTEN: There was no small amount of friendship between the government of Allende and the government of Fidel Castro back in the early '70s.

LANDAU: There was friendship between the two governments. And Letelier was personally known to Castro and was a friend of his.

KORTEN: Of course, the point of all of this and the point of the book is that none of this justifies murder carried out by foreign agents on American soil.

LANDAU: That's true. And what I think people who were around the bombing realized was the terrifying effect of such an act. Indeed, this was state terrorism. When a foreign government sends its assassins to another country, Washington, D.C., to eliminate its political dissidents. And the effect of a car-bombing, not only on Americans, but on Chilean exiles, was absolutely electrifying. People who here that a foreign government has the audacity to do something so dramatic, so horrifying in the capital of the most powerful nation in the world are oftentimes put to silence.

KORTEN: I mean if they're not safe here, if people are not safe here in the United States, how can they be expected to be safe anywhere?

LANDAU: Exactly. That's exactly the point of doing something like that.

KORTEN: And that was exactly the effect the DINA wished to create, I'm sure.

LANDAU: Yes, it was. And it did.

KORTEN: I want to get back around to something that we started to touch on in the last half-hour, and I don't think really completed. And that was the role that the U.S. CIA played in all of this and the relationship. Obviously they had, I guess as a matter of policy, you say, a relationship with DINA which was fairly friendly, and therefore led to a lot of cooperation on a lot of counts.

JOHN DINGES: The CIA was, as the Church Committee reported, was instrumental in the activities against Allende during that period in the early '70s. After the coup in 1973, the CIA is also know to have participated in setting up the secret police, which was the coordinated intelligence service uniting several previously separate Chilean intelligence agencies. The CIA maintained liaison. In fact -- liaison being the connec-

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tion between the two intelligence agencies on an official level. The head of liaison for the CIA was General Vernon Walters, the man that we talked about previously as having information about what happened in Paraguay.

So, the contacts between Chile's DINA and the U.S. CIA were institutionalized. They weren't casual contacts. And they were very friendly.

KORTEN: They were regular contacts.

DINGES: They were regular.

KORTEN: Now, it would seem fairly obvious that if the CIA, if George Bush and his assistants had any inkling that an assassination attempt was about to take place, that they might have done something.

Can we reasonably conclude from the information that they had that an assassination was intended, or was that too much, to extreme a conclusion for them to draw, based on the evidence they had. That is to say that here we had a couple of guys go to Paraguay, said that they were going to be working with the CIA, wanted some visas, and it came out that they weren't working with the CIA. That alone doesn't indicate that they were headed here on an assassination attempt does it?

MAN: Chile's secret police had a reputation for carrying out assassinations on foreign soil.

KORTEN: But they had never carried one out here.

MAN: But they had never carried one out here. We're not saying in our book that the CIA knew that there was an assassination afoot. But given the fact that the Chileans obviously were trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the CIA by claiming CIA approval for this, trying to involve the CIA in some way with this operation, the CIA, we maintain, in its counterespionage function, would have normally tried to control, tried to police what was going on in this secret Chilean mission they'd detected, whether they knew it was an assassination or not.

KORTEN: Did you ever, either of you personally, interview George Bush about this and ask him?

MAN: No. We telephoned to Mr. Bush's office, but there was no response.

KORTEN: He was on the stump a lot this year. In his political campaign, it might have been possible to approach him in the course of the campaign, wouldn't it?

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MAN: Well, we tried. But we also understood that he was busy. And we also understood that he probably didn't want to talk about this.

There were a couple other factors that were known to the CIA at the time when this information about the Paraguay incident was made available.

KORTEN: What was that information?

MAN: One is that the Chilean Government had planned an assassination in New York City of a U.N. official, a Chilean working at the U.N. named Gabriel Valdez (?). This was detected and stopped.

KORTEN: The CIA knew it.

MAN: The CIA knew it.

KORTEN: And they stopped that assassination attempt.

MAN: We don't know who stopped it. We were told that U.N. security people picked it up.

KORTEN: Yeah.

MAN: They also knew, we are certain, of a very important Murder Incorporated in the Southern Cone. It was called Operation Condor. And this was an alliance -- a formal alliance, by the way -- between the intelligence services of six different South American countries, including Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. This was an association, basically, to murder each other's dissidents in these associated countries.

Now, there was another operation -- and this information was gotten by an FBI agent in South America one week after the assassination and was common knowledge in those intelligence services. Therefore we conclude the CIA knew that when an assassination was planned in a country not a member of this alliance, this Condor alliance, third-country passports were routinely used for these kinds of missions. That is exactly the kind of operation that began in Paraguay, when two Chilean officials there requested Paraguayan passports and got U.S. visas on them.

KORTEN: So what you're saying is that, at the very least, the CIA should have smelled a rat. We don't know whether they did, but they should have.

MAN: Yes.

KORTEN: Gentlemen, I thank you both for coming and

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talking with us during the hour.

We've been talking with John Dinges and Saul Landau. They are the authors of a new book called "Assassination on Embassy Row." It is about the murder of Orlando Letelier here in Washington four years ago. It is a long, detailed and painstakingly researched book which I'm sure is going to be the talk of the town here in Washington for some weeks and months ahead.

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[Please note: Except in cases where the person is directly addressed by name, speakers are identified as "MAN," since their voices are indistinguishable one from the other.]

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